

The University of Chicago

LOGICAL ANALYSIS OF CONCEPTS
IN SELECTED SYSTEMS
OF THEOLOGY

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL IN
CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR
OF PHILOSOPHY

1940

By
DUNCAN ELLIOT LITTLEFAIR

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CHAPTER VIII

A COMPARISON OF BARTH, HEIM, AND SCHLEIERMACHER

A brief comparison of the men we have been studying will perhaps serve to draw together the threads of our discourse. We shall not attempt to compare their theologies or philosophical systems. This has not been the object of our analysis at any time. We have been interested only in an analysis of statements and the various concepts of "truth" and "knowledge." It is our purpose at the moment to bring to light the basic points of agreement and disagreement of the three men we have been studying.

Logic

We deal first with their attention to the rigours and demands of logic. We have seen from the beginning that logic has to do with language and the rules of usage of terms. The rules of logic are the rules of formation and transformation of terms; they are in short the rules of language. We may form any number of languages with whatever rules we choose. Each language will have its own logic. But to speak intelligibly within any one language we must follow the rules of that language. If we change our rules we change our language and we can no longer claim to speak meaningfully to those who follow the rules we have abandoned. Of course, we may make transformations from one set of rules to another, but we must then make a formal correlation of the two and give the rules of transformation.

We have gone to some pains to point out that both Heim and Barth show great disdain for the rules of logic. Both men are perfectly willing to use logic as long as it fits with the necessities of religion and is congenial to the statements which they feel "must" be made. But when logic comes into active opposition to our religious ideas, or statements which must be made in order to satisfy our religious needs, then neither has the slightest hesitation in discarding logic in favour of the needs

of religion, or the "logic of religion."¹ We have seen that while Heim in one place denies the legitimacy of a double logic and in another place asserts it to be necessary, he does in point of fact make use of the freedom of the double logic.² The reasoning followed by these men is that when we talk of finite objects and matters of limited importance we may safely confine ourselves within the logic of our language. But when we ascend the scale to talk of the Infinite and All-Important, then we cannot expect to obey the rules of language. The greatness of the object excuses us from the limitations of language. However, no rules of transposition are laid down and no parallel logic is established.

Schleiermacher is not found guilty of this grievous error. It would be well if his dictum on this particular matter were more carefully observed by Heim, Barth, and many another theologian. In this instance Schleiermacher's stand must be considered as entirely praiseworthy. He asserts that the supernatural quality of an object is no reason for indulging in suprarational language.³ To fail to convey the greatness and mystery of the object is to fail in our efforts of expression. It is to be confined within ourselves and our own enjoyment. Communication of the experience to others is made more than usually difficult. But this difficulty is not overcome by speaking irrationally. For in this case communication is almost entirely impossible. It is a sign that the speaker has not properly understood his experience with the object or has not taken the pains to express himself properly. It is perfectly clear that if we experience an object, whether it be "natural" or "super-natural," it must be experienced as something. That which it is experienced as being is to all intents and purposes the object itself. If we claim that that which we have experienced is no object at all, we nevertheless are still under the obligation of describing our feelings and experience. Even here there is no respite from the necessity of speaking rationally. As we have observed, Schleiermacher is so thoroughly

¹Karl Heim, Jesus der Herr (Berlin: Furche Verlag, 1938), p. 196. See also Karl Barth, Credo (Zollikon: Verlag der Evangelische Buchhandlung, 1939), p. 38.

²Heim, Glaubensgewissheit (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1920), p. 47.

³Friedrich Schleiermacher, The Christian Faith, trans. H. R. Macintosh and J. S. Stuart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), p. 66.

logical as to deny the possibility of speaking of the Supernatural and confines himself to describing only his experience or feelings with regard to it. It is a state of the self that he describes. God is the "whence" of this emotional state.

Nature of Knowledge

When we come to a consideration of the nature of knowledge as found in these three writers, we find some striking agreements. All three are agreed in making a division between objective and non-objective, or analytic and intuitive knowledge. Heim says that with regard to the supernatural and God we know immediately and absolutely.¹ There is no process of reasoning involved. We do not come at our knowledge by means of analysis and categorization. The latter is the way of objective or scientific knowledge and must be confined to our relations with material objects. For Heim knowledge of the world is scientific, mediate, and relative. Knowledge of the self and of God is intuitive, immediate, absolute, and unquestionably true. Our discussion of the nature of intuition in our analysis of Schleiermacher is relevant.

Karl Barth's position is almost identical with that of Heim.² He too limits scientific knowledge to the objects of the world and distinguishes knowledge of God as being knowledge of a quite different sort, namely, intuitive, immediate, and absolute. Schleiermacher's assertion and defense of this type of knowledge we have only very recently discussed. That Schleiermacher should assume such a position seems rather strange in the face of his denial of the legitimacy of a double logic or supra-rational statements. There is no need for us to discuss again the fact that knowledge is the body of true statements that we can make and that while there may be any number of paths to knowledge, there can not be two types of knowledge.

Before we pass on we must consider the way in which these three men consider truth to be established. All corresponding to the two types of knowledge there are two types of truth. The truth of the analytic scientific investigation is relative, whereas that of the intuitive process is absolute. By "absolute" is

¹Heim, Glaube und Denken (4th ed.; Berlin: Furche Verlag, 1938), pp. 147ff.

²Barth, Offenbarung Kirche Theologie (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1934), pp. 37ff.

meant the fact that the object about which we make our statements is beyond the finite or the ordinary methods of knowing. An "absolute" truth is one that is unmistakably true and not subject to the variable conditions of self and environment. As Karl Barth puts it, there are no "viewpoints" with regard to knowledge gained through revelation.¹

Truth of the intuitive or absolute type is not established by actually finding the empirical situation referred to by the statement. For the most part there is no "object" of the world designated by our religious terms. Writers who accept the existence of two types of knowledge and two types of truth will grant that sentences are true scientifically speaking when we find situations or objects referred to. But sentences which are absolutely or intuitively true are established in quite a different manner. Let us examine the way in which they are proven.

In the first place, these sentences do not need to be proven true! To speak of proving them true is to apply scientific jargon to a sphere in which it is completely out of place. The knowledge gained is immediately true. The truth is given!² The one to whom it comes knows immediately for he is in direct touch with the object. In the strict sense there is no sentence given, for as soon as we utter our "knowledge" it is mediated and therefore liable to error. So we see that not only does the "knowledge" not need to be proven but there are no sentences to prove!

In the second place, it seems to be sufficient proof of truth if we feel strongly enough. We have been constantly cautioning against confusing strength of conviction with supporting data. The strength of our feeling does not make up for a lack of evidence. But in all three men studied we have observed time and again that statements are accepted purely on the grounds of our feelings.³ Most striking illustration of this is with regard to Schleiermacher's basic religious state, the feeling of absolute dependence. He describes a certain feeling that men have as being a feeling of absolute dependence and it is immediately assumed without further evidence that we are absolutely dependent! From

¹Barth, Dogmatik, Dritte Auflage (Zollikon: Verlag der Evangelische Buchhandlung, 1939), I, 114.

²Barth, Offenbarung Kirche Theologie, p. 37.

³Barth, Dogmatik, p. 147. See also Heim, Jesus der Weltvollender (Berlin: Furcht Verlag, 1937), p. 58.

this assumption, for it is no more, he goes on to construct this entire religious system.¹

In the third place, certain things are known to be true because they must be true in order to justify our feelings and beliefs. Our convictions regarding God are true because there must be a "whence" of our feeling of dependence. God must be all in all and über-polar because we need and believe in such a God.² We must have a personal "Du" relation with Jesus because otherwise the witness and faith of multitudes of Christians has been wrong.³ So the strength of conviction, the emotional needs of the believer and the simple belief itself are taken as evidence of the truth of religious statements. Needless to say, there is something radically wrong with the religious approach that makes truth and knowledge dependent on such personal grounds.

Use of Language

The use which our three men make of language and their attitude toward it has already been indicated in our discussion of the place of logic in their thinking. Since both Heim and Barth discount the necessities of "secular" logic even as they give it acknowledgment, we should expect to find the contradictions and meaningless expressions which we have found. Both Heim and Barth attempt to describe that which cannot be described, and in so doing are forced to describe negatively and in contradictory terms.⁴ God is a reality, but he is not a reality. God is unknowable, but he is knowable. God is objective, but he is unobjective.⁵ As a result of this attempt their terms have a very strong pragmatic but little or no existential meaning. Their statements, on analysis, turned out to be nothing more than descriptions of their emotions and attempts to explain and justify their beliefs.⁶ In striving to use language to describe that which they admit cannot be described, they destroy the meaning of their terms and finish

¹See Schleiermacher, The Christian Faith, pp. 14ff.

²Heim, Glaube und Denken, p. 37.

³Heim, Jesus der Weltvollender, p. 112.

⁴See Heim, Glaube und Denken, pp. 71ff. Barth, Dogmatik, pp. 91ff.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Heim, Glaube und Denken, pp. 37ff.

by having done no more than give expression to their inner state of faith, aspiration, and need.

Schleiermacher was well aware of this difficulty. He was quick to admit that the Infinite cannot be pictured or described. So he did frankly and with purpose what Heim and Barth did unwittingly: he made it his purpose to describe feelings and emotions. Since God is infinite and beyond our scope of knowledge and language, we have no other recourse than to confine ourselves to our feelings. The Absolute can be known only intuitively and absolutely, and only through our feelings can we grasp the Universe.

But we have also noted that although Schleiermacher sets out from this empirical basis he too degenerates to attempting to characterize and describe the indescribable. For while the primary feeling of absolute dependence may be found in men, the actual fact of such a dependence and a reality on which we are thus dependent is purely hypothetical, and must therefore be explained and justified. It is in attempting to do the latter that Schleiermacher comes to grief. Thus Heim and Barth start with an attempt to describe a supernatural God and end by describing only their own feelings. Schleiermacher, on the other hand, begins with the feelings but ends with the same attempt to describe the Infinite and unknowable. They start from different points, but their fundamental error of procedure brings them together in the same pit of disaster.

Schleiermacher's error is even more to be wondered at in view of the nature of religious communication as set forth by him. In the first place, he asserts that religion cannot be taught or transmitted from one person to another. Religion must rather be caught. Every individual must find the infinite for himself. Of course, the best way to find this Unknown is to be able to take part in the intimate communal life of those who have and are conscious of their absolute dependence. Community is a necessary expression of the religious state. Others may thus help us by providing us with a place and opportunity to find and experience God. They may aid further by giving us concepts which will help us to be more receptive and appreciative, but more than this they cannot do.

Schleiermacher suggests three possible forms of speech through which the creative drive in us may be given expression. These three forms are the poetical, the rhetorical, and the

descriptively didactic. The last mentioned is peculiarly the form for dogmatics which is logically ordered reflection upon the utterances of the pious. The rhetorical speech is partly an expression of the inner state but partly designed to mould someone or change something in the outer world. But the poetical is purely with regard to expressing the pious state and is thus most distinctly the speech of religion.¹ It will be observed that this is in keeping with our description of Schleiermacher's statements as primarily pragmatic, for in our analysis poetry is essentially a pragmatic utterance. It is designed to express, not to describe.

Within the religious community itself the form of communication is even further removed from the conceptual descriptive speech of science. For in the religious group our speech is that of love, and in love no words are needed to convey our meaning.² To people in love even the silence of one has a meaning that is well understood, if only by the other who loves. In Schleiermacher's own words: "Daher zieht sich aus solchen noch weiten Kreisen das Religiöse zurück in die noch vertrauten Unterhaltungen des Freundschaft und in den Zwiesprach der Liebe, wo Blick und Gestalt deutlicher werden als Wörter, und wo auch ein heiliges Schweigen verständlich ist."³

The community Schleiermacher describes is indeed most unusual. Speech is at a minimum and the chief purpose of communication is to infect the other with your feeling. It is not to give an idea or analyze a difficulty that we speak. Our intent is to make vivid to the other the feeling that we have so that when we are through "speaking" the other or others have exactly the same feeling that we have. This communication he describes as music without sound or song! In other words it is mere vibration.

Verkündigt sich ihm dann laut oder leise die Uebereinstimmung seiner ansicht mit dem was in ihnen; dann werden heilige Mysterien--nicht nur andeutungsvolle Embleme, sondern recht angesehen naturliche Andeutungen eines bestimmten Bewusstseins und bestimmter Empfindungen--erfunden und gefeiert, gleichsam ein höhere Chor, der in einer eignen erhabnen Sprache der auffordernden Stimme antwortet. Aber nicht nur gleichsam; sondern so wie eine solche Rede Musik ist auch ohne Gesang und Ton, so gibt es auch eine Musik unterden Heiligen, die zur Rede wird ohne Worte,⁴ sum bestimmtesten verständlichsten Ausdruck des Innersten.

¹The Christian Faith, pp. 78ff; also Die Reden, pp. 40ff.

²Über die Religion, pp. 178f. ³Ibid., p. 180.

⁴Ibid.

One could scarcely find a more open confession of the purely pragmatic interest of religion. And for one who speaks of God as being unknowable and indescribable no other course is open. Schleiermacher was thus thoroughly logical in his description of the ideal type of religious speech. The pity is that he allowed his dogmatic interest to carry him far afield in speculative description of the indescribable.

Transcendence of God

We have already made a brief reference to the existence of some fundamental error in the approach to religion, or should we be more accurate and say religious knowledge, of Heim, Barth, and Schleiermacher. Such a basic error is in no wise traceable to a common theology or a sympathetic emotional and intellectual disposition on the part of the three men. Both Heim and Barth are very bitter opponents of the theological thought of Schleiermacher and that of each other. We could add that there is little or no emotional affinity of the three men. Certainly there is none between Barth and Heim, and from what we are able to judge of Schleiermacher by his writings little or none between him and the other two men. And yet we must qualify these statements to some extent, for the common error is due in part to a common emotional disposition. But, more accurately speaking, it is an error of method and approach.

The fundamental error consists in the demand that God be supernatural, unknowable, and "über-polar." It consists in the first place of the fact that we should make any stipulations concerning the nature of God, and secondly that they should consist of characteristics which make it impossible for him to be known.

Of course, in any investigation we must have some idea as to what we are looking for. If we are to seek God we must have a definition of God to guide us in our search. We must state in general terms what the term "God" is to mean. But thereafter we must allow the actual data to determine the specific content of the term. If, for instance, "God" is to be the term for the greatest being in the world, or the greatest being known to man, then we must not stipulate that this greatest being be friendly to man. Otherwise we are not seeking for the greatest being but rather the greatest being friendly to man. The more of these necessary traits we assert, the more difficult it is to find any

being possessing them. The danger then is that we shall create such a being in our imagination, or finding a being possessing some of the characteristics, force on him the others as well.

In the case of the three men we have studied, and they are representative of most theologians, the one trait regarded as absolutely necessary is that God be beyond the realm of the simply objective! Of course, this makes it very easy for us to pile up the characteristics which God possesses, for if he is beyond the objective and empirical, there is no way in which our imposition can be refuted or denied. But advantageous as this may seem to be at first sight, it is on the contrary decidedly disadvantageous. For we soon become embarrassed with the characteristics attributed and we have no way either to prove our own or deny others. And while it is fun to be imaginative, the purely imaginative soon palls. It is difficult to base practical living in a concrete world on imaginative creations.

Heim, Barth, and Schleiermacher are equally insistent on the necessity of God being something other than finite. Karl Heim has three guiding principles for his theology. He seeks in the first place to remove religion from the control of objective standards. The ordinary processes of logic are invalidated by the demands of the spirit. The secular must be clearly distinguished from the spiritual. In the second place he seeks to prove that God is and must be "über-polar." God cannot be known in the relative manner in which finite reality is known. His third guiding principle is to justify the belief in a transcendent God. Because this religious belief is so vital to the religious life and so deeply entrenched in our emotional natures it must be justified.

Barth, despite his opposition to Heim, is moved by the same principles. It is his chief concern to remove God from the control of men and the vagaries of the relative. God must not be controlled in any way by the activities or interests of men. There are no viewpoints in theology. There is no truth found by men. In Barth's opinion there is no greater sin than the attempt to control God and to know God in the secular sense. To be able to prove anything concerning God is to have control of him. And yet, as we have seen, Barth has no difficulty in describing very minutely the nature of God. The matter of control is thought to be eliminated by the assertion that such knowledge is given and not discovered. We have endeavored to demonstrate that no such

distinction is valid. However, our concern at the present time is simply to point out the desire of Barth to remove religious assertions from critical control.

Schleiermacher too is guilty of this same attempt. He does not begin by openly asserting the necessity of thus removing God from the realm of the finite but it is at all times a vital part of his thought. The feeling of dependence we have seen to be a part of all life and to be a purely finite matter. The religious feeling must be distinguished from this finite nature; so it is termed "absolute." And of course this necessitates an absolute being somehow outside all finite life. Schleiermacher more or less takes it for granted that our feeling of "absolute" dependence demands and therefore asserts the existence of some being of "absolute" proportion in contrast to the finite. One might reasonably ask the question why this feeling could not be associated with some peculiar aspect or relation of the actual present world. It should not be forgotten that the term "absolute" is a term in the pragmatic dimension and has no existential meaning.

Let us note some of the reasons for this very pointed emphasis found in the work of all three men. All four reasons which we are about to suggest have been previously mentioned in more or less explicit manner. We wish now to bring them together as explanation of this very basic common element of three diverse theological systems. Firstly, it is because all three men have confidence in the "rightness" and "truth" of the feelings of men. Heim, Barth, and Schleiermacher, by virtue of formal statement and actual practice have asserted the inherent truth value of religious beliefs and emotions. It men through the ages have believed strongly in the existence of a transcendent God, then there must be such a being.¹ If men have a feeling which they describe as being "absolutely dependent," then there must be some being on whom they could feel themselves absolutely dependent. In other words, feelings are not taken as indications of the attitudes and needs of individuals, but as indications of existential reality. Granted that we are never presented to an object without some emotional reaction, it does not follow therefore that there must be some

¹Heim, Glaube und Denken, pp. 240ff. Barth, Dogmatik, p. 148. Schleiermacher, The Christian Faith, pp. 12ff.

object corresponding to any feeling we may have. If this were the case, our world would be peopled with many strange creatures and objects found only in the imaginations of men.

Secondly, the directing principle of investigation we are describing seems to be based on the belief that unless men have something other than that which can be found in the world they will not be able to satisfy their emotional needs.¹ Here again the impositive approach comes into play. That which men feel they need is given the central place in the scheme, and reality is designed to meet the needs. A more empirical approach would seek to make men acquainted with reality as it is actually found to exist. Their needs would then be fashioned by reality. It would seem we are unjustified in assuming that men must have something other than the objective finite world in order to satisfy themselves. And even if men do feel the need of something other than that which they can find in this world, there is here neither indication nor proof that the something other actually exists.

The third reason is to be found in the very common feeling that we must answer the questions of "why," "whither," and "whence." For Karl Heim religion actually begins when we ask the questions "Where are we going and from whence have we come?"² For Schleiermacher God is the "whence" of the feeling of absolute dependence. In other words, God is called in to explain the origin of a feeling. But we have come to see that such questions are quite meaningless, for there is no way in which they can be answered apart from pure speculation. There is no answer empirically justifiable. To posit God as explanation is to give some emotional satisfaction, but in reality it is simply substituting the term "God" for "whence" and "why" and "whither." There is no explanation in the formal substitution of one term for another. But more important still is the fact that there is no sufficient reason why we should allow these meaningless questions to dictate a super-empirical non-objective God.

The fourth reason for presupposing an unknowable God lies in the misplaced fear that to have knowledge of an object limits

¹Schleiermacher, The Christian Faith, p. 133. See also Heim, Glaube und Denken, p. 117. Barth, Doctrine of the Word of God, p. 178.

²Heim, Glaubensgewissheit, p. 187.

the object. This reason plays a larger part in the thinking of Barth and Schleiermacher than in Heim, and is strongest in Barth. We have examined the basis of this claim rather extensively in our analysis of Barth; so we shall not repeat it now. However, it should be clear that whereas having knowledge of an object does give us a measure of control in the way of prediction, it cannot in any way limit the object or make it dependent on us. If the object is all-pervasive, complex, and subtle, it is altogether likely that our knowledge will be less than that of simple objects, and thus our ability to predict will also be much inferior. But no matter how mysterious and subtle the object may be, we can at least gain some knowledge of it, and we can learn to know it better. Our control will be that of understanding and prediction, not of possession. We should be seeking the fullest possible knowledge of God instead of striving to prove him unknowable.

